

# Buying Recycled

## What Is “Buying Recycled?”

“Buying recycled” means purchasing items that are made from postconsumer recycled content—in other words, materials that were used once and then recycled into something else. This process is also known as “closing the loop.”

Consumers “close the loop” when they purchase products made from recycled materials. After an item has been collected for recycling, sorted and processed, and remanufactured into a new product, it still has one more critical step to undergo: purchase and reuse. If no one buys recycled-content products, the entire recycling process is ineffective.



## How Can People “Close the Loop?”

Consumers hold the key to making recycling work. Many manufacturers are already making the use of recycled materials a part of

## Key Points

- Buying recycled-content products encourages manufacturers to purchase and use recycled materials.
- Buying products with “postconsumer” content closes the recycling loop.
- Not all recyclable products can be recycled in every community.
- Buying recycled products saves energy, conserves natural resources, creates jobs, and reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills and incinerators.
- Today’s recycled-content products perform just as well, cost the same or less, and are just as available as their nonrecycled counterparts.
- New products containing recycled materials, from construction materials to playground equipment to computers, are constantly being developed.

## A Recycled Product Shopping List

More than 4,500 recycled-content products are already available in stores, and their numbers are rapidly growing. Some of the everyday products people regularly purchase contain recycled-content. Here are some items that are typically made with recycled materials:

- |                 |                             |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| • Aluminum cans | • Paper towels              |
| • Cereal boxes  | • Carpeting                 |
| • Egg cartons   | • Car bumpers               |
| • Motor oil     | • Anything made from steel  |
| • Nails         | • Glass containers          |
| • Trash bags    | • Laundry detergent bottles |
| • Comic books   |                             |
| • Newspapers    |                             |

their official company policy. By buying recycled-content products, consumers can encourage this trend, making each purchase count toward “closing the loop.” Purchasing recycled-content goods ensures continued availability of our natural resources for the future.

The first step in buying recycled-content products is correctly identifying them. As consumers demand more environmentally sound products, manufacturers are encouraged to highlight these aspects of their merchandise. While this trend is good, shoppers should be aware of the various uses of “recycled” terminology. To help consumers decipher product claims about recycled content, the

Federal Trade Commission has issued guidelines to ensure that products are properly and clearly labeled. Here are some basic definitions:

- **Recycled-content products** are made from materials that have been recovered or otherwise diverted from the solid waste stream, either during the manufacturing process or after consumer use. Recycled-content products also include products made from used, reconditioned, and remanufactured components.
- **Postconsumer content** indicates that materials used to make a product were recovered or otherwise diverted from the solid waste stream after consumer use. If this term is not noted, or if the package indicates a total recycled content with a percentage of post-consumer content (e.g., 100 percent recycled, 10 percent postconsumer), the rest of the material probably came from excess material generated during normal manufacturing processes. These materials were not used by a consumer or collected through a local recycling program.
- **Recyclable products** can be collected, separated, or otherwise recovered from the solid waste stream for use in the form of raw materials in the manufacture of a new product. This includes products that can be reused, reconditioned, or remanufactured. These products do not necessarily contain recycled materials and only benefit the environment if people recycle them after use. Not all communities collect all types of products for recycling, so it is really only recyclable if your community accepts it.
- **Products wrapped in recycled or recyclable packaging** do not necessarily contain recycled content. They can be wrapped in paper or plastic made from recycled materials, which is a good start, but the most environmentally preferable packaging is none at all.

Consumers must remember to read further than the recycling symbol or the vague language to find specific and verifiable claims. When in doubt about the recycled content of an item, asking the store clerk will not only help to inform the consumer, but also raise the store clerk's awareness of shoppers' interest in environmentally preferable products.

## Buy-Recycled Facts

- Aluminum cans contain an average of 50 percent recycled postconsumer content, while glass bottles contain an average of 30 percent.
- How many recycled plastic soda bottles does it take to make...?
  - 1 XL T-shirt.....5 bottles
  - 1 Ski jacket filler.....5 bottles
  - 1 Sweater .....27 bottles
  - 1 Sleeping bag.....35 bottles
- Manufacturers in the United States bought \$5 billion worth of recycled materials in 1995.
- One 6-foot-long plastic park bench can be made from 1,050 plastic milk jugs.

(Sources: Aluminum Association, 2000; Glass Packaging Institute; Recyclers' Handbook by Earthworks Group, 1997; Anchorage Recycling Center, 2000; American Plastics Council, 1999; National Recycling Coalition)

## What Are the Benefits of Buying Recycled?

Important advantages to buying recycled content products include:

- **Waste and Pollution Prevention:** Manufacturing products with recycled-content generally creates much less waste and pollution, ranging from truck emissions to raw material scraps.
- **Resource and Energy Conservation:** Making a new product from recycled-content materials generally reduces the amount of energy and virgin materials needed to manufacture the product.

- **Economic Development:** The Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, DC, estimates that nine jobs are created for every 15,000 tons of solid waste recycled into a new product. These jobs range from low-skilled to high-skilled positions, including materials sorters, dispatchers, truck drivers, brokers, sales representatives, process engineers, and chemists.
- **Money Savings:** Products such as re-refined motor oil, retreaded tires, and remanufactured automotive batteries will often cost less than their virgin material counterparts.

## What Are the Challenges of Buying Recycled?

Many people incorrectly assume that products made from recycled content, or used material, are inferior in quality to entirely new products. The challenge is to correct that misconception and convince businesses and consumers of the reliability of recycled-content products. According to the California Department of Conservation and the California Integrated Waste Management Board, in 1996, 97 percent of corporate purchasing agents reported that they were pleased with the performance of their recycled-content products. Though each product's quality and reliability must be judged individually, no evidence exists that recycled-content products are inferior to their virgin material counterparts. Initially, some recycled-content products were less available and harder to find than virgin products, but today, every major national store chain and nearly all small chains or independent retailers carry recycled-content products at competitive prices.

## What Are Some Emerging Trends?

A wider variety of recycled-content products are being produced every day. Some newly available items include electronic equipment, such as computers and printers, made from recycled parts; tape measures made from reconditioned

and recycled parts; kitty litter made from recycled drywall; recycled-content plastic office products; and innovative clothing and accessories made from recycled tire inner tubes.

## Buying Recycled in Action

Consumers hold the power in their wallets and on their shopping lists. Whether buying items for home, school, or work, consumers must think about the environment and the future as they consider products and brands. Below are activities that will help promote buying recycled:

- Buying recycled-content products personally and encouraging the use of recycled products at school.
- Teaching children about “closing the recycling loop” by organizing a tour of a local facility that manufactures recycled-content products, such as steel products.
- Organizing an exhibit of recycled-content products.
- Asking local stores to stock more recycled-content products.
- Looking for products that usually contain recycled materials, such as steel, glass, aluminum, egg cartons (paper), and cereal boxes.
- Purchasing remanufactured products and equipment, like toner cartridges, office furniture, auto parts, re-refined oil, or retreaded tires.
- Purchasing products that can be recycled in local communities.



## Additional Information Resources:

Visit the following Web sites for more information on buying recycled products and solid waste:

- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): <[www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)>
- U.S. EPA, Office of Solid Waste site on buying recycled: <[www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/reduce/wstewise/purchase.htm#purchase1](http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/reduce/wstewise/purchase.htm#purchase1)>
- U.S. EPA, Office of Solid Waste site on recycling and buying recycled: <[www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/muncpl/reduce.htm](http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/muncpl/reduce.htm)>
- King County, Washington: <[www.metrokc.gov/oppis/recyclea.html](http://www.metrokc.gov/oppis/recyclea.html)>
- Green Seal: <[www.GreenSeal.org](http://www.GreenSeal.org)>
- The American Plastics Council: <[www.plasticsresource.com](http://www.plasticsresource.com)>
- The Official Recycled Products Guide: <[www.recyclingdata.com](http://www.recyclingdata.com)>
- The Global Recycling Network: <[www.grn.com](http://www.grn.com)>
- The Environmental News Network's Marketplace: <[www.enn.com/marketplace/index.htm](http://www.enn.com/marketplace/index.htm)>
- Pennsylvania Resource Council's Recycling and Solid Waste Center: <[www.prc.org/recctr.htm](http://www.prc.org/recctr.htm)>
- Buy Recycled Business Alliance: <[www.nrc-recycle.org/brba/index.htm](http://www.nrc-recycle.org/brba/index.htm)>

To order the following additional documents on buying recycled and solid waste, call EPA toll-free at 800 424-9346 (TDD 800 553-7672) or look on the EPA Web site <[www.epa.gov/epaoswer/osw/publicat.htm](http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/osw/publicat.htm)>

- *The Consumer's Handbook for Reducing Solid Waste* (EPA530-K-96-003)
- *A Collection of Solid Waste Resources*—CD-ROM

EPA's WasteWise Program helpline (800 EPA-WISE) has additional resources available. These resources include information on the following:

- State Buy-Recycled Contacts
- *Buy Recycled Guidebook*